

ARTICLES

FEATURE:

BUDDHIST AND NON-BUDDHIST TRENDS TOWARDS RELIGIOUS UNITY IN MEIJI JAPAN

Introduction

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IT is a great pleasure to write the preamble of this issue of *The Eastern Buddhist* focusing on “Buddhist and Non-Buddhist Trends towards Religious Unity in Meiji Japan.”¹ This special issue incorporates a rich selection of articles, which helps to fill serious gaps in our knowledge of the Japanese religious landscape in the past hundred years and questions some received ideas about it. Yet, since some readers may ask why bother with this period, let us examine a few of the assumptions reflected in the contributions to this issue.

The Critical Nature of Meiji Religious History

As most specialists will agree, dealing with religious thinkers active during the Meiji period can hardly be innocent: it implies reflecting on issues that keep being “hot” in modern-day Japan. More specifically, since many

¹ The Meiji era technically corresponds to 1868–1912 and is followed by the Taishō era 1912–26. Obviously, besides the impact of the Restoration in 1868, imperial eras do not correspond to anything meaningful for the history of religions. However, “Meiji” has become a convenient marker for the larger period between the Restoration and the burst of militarism in the 1930s. The title of this special issue indicates this wider and intentionally fuzzy period, the time span between the Restoration and the Pacific War, including the short Taishō era. When referring specifically to 1868–1912 we shall speak of the “Meiji era,” but unless stated otherwise it will designate the broader period. It is also a way to avoid the adjective “modern,” which tends to be laden with biases about “modernity.”

problems raised at the beginning of the twentieth century remain unsolved, this type of research entails scrutinizing without complacency the present state of spirituality in this country. A critical stance is required, because asking how today's Japanese religious denominations have remolded themselves after the Restoration necessarily leads to deconstructing the way they are still aware of their own identity. The focus thus tends to shift from speculations about a remote past to concerns about the here and now, an endeavor demanding particular epistemological precautions.

Further Implications

In other words, a close look at the Meiji intellectual history tends to trigger questions about the survival of religions in post-modern societies. The Japanese case is especially interesting because of the short time span it took to implement industrialization and the resulting social changes. However, surprisingly little is known of what really happened beneath the surface of the political history over those few decades during which the Japanese leaders drove their citizens towards the goal of creating a "modern State." With the subsequent escalation of militarism in the 1930s until the capitulation, the war period only contributed to obscuring the subtle changes that had occurred within mentalities. Whatever the circumstances leading to this situation, today most observers notice that, despite the beautiful remains of religious traditions in some limited areas, Japan has become a land where, at least on the surface, materialism appears as rampant as in most industrialized countries. Investigating the background for this constitutes one of the chief motivations that prompted the research which can be discovered in the following pages.

History of this Project

After disclosing some of the reasons for focusing on Meiji religious figures, it is fair to explain how this project saw the light of day. A serious study of intellectuals active during the Meiji period often leads to the awareness that *it is much easier to condemn them than to make the effort required to understand them*. This is especially true because the Meiji era coincides with a spectacular rise of nationalism and a crisis within the Buddhist clergy. Most religious denominations were torn between the need to express their teachings in a more universal language and the necessity they felt to preserve their own sectarian traditions. While the threat of State Shinto had direct conse-

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quences, confrontation with the West inside and outside the country prompted Japanese intellectuals to recast their own religion in a way that would enable them to compete with the Christian claim for universality.

Since a study of such a wide topic requires collaborative and interdisciplinary work, this project started with a gathering of scholars researching the specific area of Meiji religions. The occasion was provided by the XIXth World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions held in Tokyo at the end of March 2005. We convened a panel entitled “Toward the Rediscovery of Non-sectarian Buddhism,” a topic whose irony may have remained obscure for those who took the title at face value. Rather than bashing “sectarian consciousness,” a facile strategy in the study of Japanese Buddhism, the idea was to adopt a more constructive stance by examining counter-examples of people who, at least apparently, tried to overcome sectarian boundaries. The explicit aim was to lay the basis for a larger questioning about the present state of Japanese Buddhism, where divisions among the twelve major denominations seem irreversible, and where research continues to be dominated by sectarian categories.

Spotlight on Murakami Senshō

Obviously, the purpose of the panel was not to accept claims of universality uncritically, but rather to look at the historical, sociological and intellectual backdrop that allowed these ideas to surface almost a century ago, around the time of the Russo-Japanese War (1904–5). To prevent the discussion from falling into abstract speculations, we chose to start with the specific example of Murakami Ssenshō 村上專精 (1851–1929), who published the first three volumes of his *Bukkyō tōitsuron* 仏教統一論 (On the Unification of Buddhism) between 1901 and 1905. The first objective was to examine his ideas and their reception among contemporary figures. This objective was largely reached, and most of the articles included in this special issue precisely analyze Murakami and his thought, or contemporary figures instrumental in establishing so-called “trans-sectarian Buddhism.” Six of the contributions are revised versions of papers presented at the IAHHR Congress, with a welcome addition from Professor Sueki, who kindly agreed to let us publish an English version of the chapter on Murakami in his *Meiji shisōkaron: Kindai Nihon no shisō saikō 1* 明治思想家論: 近代日本の思想・再考 I (Essays on Meiji Intellectuals: A Reconsideration of Modern Japanese Thought, Volume 1).

An Emerging Field

Aside from this recent publication by Professor Sueki, the dearth of research on Murakami and his work is striking. It is no exaggeration to say that since the pioneer dissertation of Kathleen Staggs (1979) no major study has been visible, either in Japanese or in Western languages.² One can easily identify at least two reasons for this neglect. The first one seems to be the controversial appraisal among his peers. As we will see in the following articles, Murakami was temporarily forced to leave the Ōtani branch of the Shin denomination³ to which he belonged, because of his involvement with a reform movement, but despite his rehabilitation he retained the label of being a “controversial scholar.” The second reason most likely comes from the limitations of his scholarship and methodology. From the criteria of present Buddhologists, Murakami’s assertions on Buddhist history do reveal their weaknesses, especially when he spoke of Indian Buddhism without having access to Indic languages.

Nonetheless, Murakami also gained evident recognition during his lifetime: among other honors he was appointed as the first full professor of Indian Philosophy at Tokyo Imperial University in 1917, and became the president of the newly created Otani University in 1926. There is therefore a great deal of space for re-examining his ideas from a perspective that does not fall into simple praise or criticism, but which tries to understand their place in a specific context. The emergence of such a vantage point is just another way to expand our knowledge of Japanese religious history around the beginning of the twentieth century. In this special issue, we have chosen to keep a sharp focus on the figure of Murakami and his circle, while avoiding to concentrate exclusively on him. This is reflected in the option of not putting together a “Murakami special issue,” which allows greater flexibility and more critical distance.

² This is not to say that Murakami is completely missing; there are a few exceptions, but they basically only mention his name. See, for instance, Snodgrass 1997 and Vita 2003.

³ The Shin denomination presently comprises ten branches. Among them the Ōtani branch of the Shin denomination (Shinshū Ōtani-ha), renamed so in 1881 after having been recognized as the Higashi branch since 1877. To avoid confusion, in this issue “denomination” will be used for *shū* 宗 in its post-Meiji usage, and “branch” for *ha* 派. Fortunately an increasing number of studies are focusing on the Shin denomination, but the lament expressed ten years ago retains some truth: Amstutz 1996.

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In this regard, I would like to express my appreciation for the open-mindedness of the Editorial Board of this journal. When we voiced concern that some of our research might raise issues that are still sensitive for the Shin denomination, the editors guaranteed that we should not exert any restraint over this. Institutions that display such generosity are rare enough to deserve a special mention.

Finally, let me note the growing signs of a renewed interest in Meiji religions.⁴ In spite of these encouraging indications, it is true that the division of labor still makes it difficult to overcome the barriers of specializations and sectarian affiliations. We further need to expand categories and promote forms of joint research that would apprehend modern Japanese intellectual history as a whole, including Buddhist and Christian representatives, and also incorporate a much broader social spectrum. This special issue is only a modest attempt to indicate a new direction, and its goal will be reached if it boosts enthusiasm for further study.

What to Expect from This Issue

Let me conclude these prefatory remarks by giving an outline of the different contributions. Together they weave a picture of Meiji religions found nowhere else, nicely dovetailing with each other to reveal some of the crucial trends towards unity in Buddhist and Christian circles.

We will start our journey towards discovering “Buddhist and Non-Buddhist Trends towards Religious Unity” with the English version of Professor Sueki Fumihiko’s article “Building a Platform for Academic Buddhist Studies: Murakami Senshō.” This could have become a tribute to Professor Sueki’s “ancestor” at Tokyo University, but it actually examines without complacency the role of Murakami in the emerging field of Buddhist studies without hiding the limitations of his scholarship.

The next contribution by Professor Okada Masahiko compares Inoue Enryō 井上円了 with Murakami, showing that these two prominent intellectuals

⁴ Let me mention only a few recent examples after 2003. The journal *Japanese Religions* published a special issue on Meiji Christianity in January 2004 (vol. 29, nos. 1/2), which, aside from informative articles, contains a list of Master’s Theses and Doctoral Dissertations on Christianity in Meiji Japan 1993–2003 (pp. 148–9). The excellent book by Sawada 2004 definitely has become one of the most helpful resources on this period. Of course, the 2003 special issue of *The Eastern Buddhist* dedicated to Kiyozawa Manshi (vol. 35, nos. 1/2) can serve as a companion to the present one.

similarly sought to find the essence of Buddhism but reached almost opposite conclusions. His article “Revitalization versus Unification: A Comparison of the Ideas of Inoue Enryō and Murakami Senshō” demonstrates the importance of understanding the work of these two thinkers from the perspective of mutual emulation.

The third article by John LoBreglio provides an innovative analysis of the trend towards unification in Meiji religions. As shown by the title “Uniting Buddhism: The Varieties of *Tsūbukkyō* in Meiji-Taishō Japan and the Case of Takada Dōken,” it begins with an insightful discussion of the category of *tsūbukkyō* 通仏教, translated as “transdenominational Buddhism.” The second half of the article constitutes the first account in a Western language of the Sōtō priest Takada Dōken 高田道見, an original figure who strove to promote a universal form of Buddhism.

The following piece by Michel Mohr focuses on the evolution in Murakami’s intellectual universe, which unfolded from discovering the “consistency” pervading Buddhist teachings to an awareness of their fundamental “unity.” Although it is not entirely transparent from its title, “Murakami Senshō: In Search for the Fundamental Unity of Buddhism,” this article discloses the extra-Buddhist sources that appear to have inspired Murakami.

Our fifth article will open the discussion to a comparative perspective. James Mark Shields writes on “Parameters of Reform and Unification in Modern Japanese Buddhist Thought: Murakami Senshō and Critical Buddhism.” He argues that reforms have always been at the center of Buddhist history, but that the quest for harmony in modern Japanese Buddhist thought has often been an ambiguous discourse. His sharp examination of the tensions between the desire for reform and the quest for harmony stresses the need to take ideological issues into account.

The next contribution by Yamaguchi Aki goes one step further in providing a broader context. Her article, “Awakening to a Universalist Perspective: The Unitarian Influence on Religious Reform in Japan,” gives the necessary touch to understand that ideas about unity were *not* a trademark of Buddhist denominations. Discussing Meiji intellectual history without taking into account the tremendous importance of the encounter with Christianity simply would miss a component that was central to most discussions related to religion, especially in the 1890s. Yamaguchi also explores areas of similarity in the reinterpretation of Buddhism and Christianity driven by the increasing pressure of nationalism.

The concluding article of this special issue is Ryan Ward’s “Against

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Buddhist Unity: Murakami Senshō and his Sectarian Critics.” It is particularly suitable for closing our investigation of Murakami and his ideas because it reexamines them from two completely new points of view. First, he presents “the other side of the mirror,” namely he analyses the discourse on individuals belonging to the broad category of “sectarian-minded conservative thinkers,” who opposed Murakami. Second, he reexamines Murakami’s own ideas in the light of his last writings, showing that considerable shifts had often occurred in his mind. This stimulating piece uses many hitherto unknown sources and contributes to demonstrating the complexity of debates occurring within each denomination during the Meiji period. It will also help the reader to avoid considering Murakami and his peers as monolithic thinkers. This article suggests the need for carefully considering the context and the phase of evolution within the thought of each individual, and to apprehend their ideas as ever-moving objects of study redefining themselves at each moment.

Without precluding your appraisal of this issue of *The Eastern Buddhist*, I am confident that it reveals some unknown facts about Meiji religions and opens new perspectives for more interdisciplinary research on this topic.

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